MOORE VERSUS HARRIS

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MOORE VERSUS HARRIS

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MOORE VERSUS HARRIS

An intimate correspondence between George Moore and Frank Harris relating to the Brook Kerith, Heloise and Abelard, astonishing criticism of George Bernard Shaw, Moore's rejection of Oscar Wilde as an artist, important and amazing statements about other contemporary men of letters, disclosing the true valuation George Moore places on his own personality and books.

INCLUDING

fac-simile reproductions of letters and auction records of some of the letters printed herein, also caricatures by Max Beerbohm and by the late Claude Lovat Fraser.

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THE letters printed in these pages have passed through my hands before they found their way to the auction room. Frank Harris is the only critic of our times who takes George Moore to task. The portrait of his old friend, which appeared this year in the second volume of his "Contemporary Portraits," astonished even those who knew Harris' opinion of Moore. It seemed severe and pedantic. It surprised me who heard so often Frank Harris talk of Moore.

I believe Harris has an affection for Moore the man. I know he admires the artistry in Moore's early books. He thinks "The Lovers of Orelay" one of the best love stories and recommends "Confessions," the "Memoirs" and "The Mummer's Wife."

But Harris is a conscientious critic, and, as Moore says himself, with an inborn love for the truth. Therefore he took Moore's measure, in the correspondence printed in the following pages. And these missives lead up finally to Harris' portrait of Moore.

George Moore assumes immediately the part of a defendant and I do not believe he helps his own case when he denies Oscar Wilde as artist, calls Shaw a clown, tries his hand in a most irreverential way on Jesus and finally emerges a self-styled savant of Biblical research.

These letters prove George Moore a self-centered, conceited egoist, vain, ignorant and totally unappreciative of other men's genius.

Guido Bruno.

The Best Talker in London, with one of his best listeners.
For my old friend Frank Harris, this scribble in
record of a scene which, happily for me,
has been so frequent in the past twenty years.
Max, February 1st 1914

My Dear Harris:

I have just received your letter and my memories of pleasant hours I spent with you in conversation when we were both young men compel me to reply to your letter at once, though I am afraid my answers to your questions will not be those that will be of use to you. You know that I came into the world under bonds to speak the truth, I mean what appears to me the truth, about art, and, however much I might like to write you a letter that would be of use to you I can only write the letter which the post will put into your hands in ten or a dozen days if the vessel that carries it escapes a torpedo.

The first thing you ask is for me to write to you about Oscar Wilde, and this I can do easily, but I am afraid that my opinions regarding him will not please you, for they are not the opinions you hold. You would put him in the first class as a writer, and I should put him in the third or fourth. It is not a long time since I read a book of his called "Intentions," and it seems to me very thin and casual, without depth, therefore, unoriginal; no man is original in the surface of his mind; to be original we must go deep, right down to the roots,, and Oscar Wilde's talent seems to me essentially rootless: something growing in a glass in a little water. I was struck by his lack of style; by style, I mean rhythm. It is all quite clear and correct but his sentences do not sway. He had a certain dramatic gift, he moves his charcters deftly and his dialogue is not without grace. It is often to the point. He had a pretty ingenious drawing-room wit, and these qualities enabled him to write plays that are not intolerable to a man of letters, and superficial enough to attract audiences. If I understand your letter rightly you seem to think that Wilde's abnormal impulses mark him out as an interesting subject for literary study. It might be so if Wilde were a great writer. He is that in your opinion, but in my opinion, as I have already said, he is in the third or fourth class and, therefore, not worth troubling about, and I do not think that anybody would have troubled about him if the Marquis of Queensbury had not written him a post card; had it not been for that unlucky post card Wilde and his literature would be sleeping comfortably in the dust at the bottom of an almost forgotten drawer in company with Frank Miles' drawings. I never had any other opinions about Wilde than those I am expressing in this letter, and as time has confirmed me in my opinions regarding him, you will understand that I am more unfitted than perhaps anybody else to write an article on your biography.

You ask me to express opinions about Shaw, and his work, but I can only express my opinion about writers whose aims are the same as mine and you know that Shaw and I have nothing in common.

At the end of the letter you tell me that your book about Oscar Wilde may be prosecuted and that my good opinion of it might help you.

The only difference between the Anglo-Saxon and other races is that somehow it has come to be believed by the Anglo-Saxon race that if a man sings a smutty song, the morality of the whole nation will decline. We maintain on the contrary that morality is above literature just as much as the tides are uninfluenced by any amount of water that you would take out of the sea or put into the sea. The morality of mankind is the same always, and these prosecutions have no effect except blackmail. There was once upon a time in England an English poet who was very fond of urging the government to take action against booksellers who sold licentious books. At his death it was discovered that his library contained the finest collection of indecent literature in the world.

Very sincerely yours,

George Moore.

G. B. S. by Claude Lovat Fraser

My Dear Harris:

I know that there is nothing in "The Brook Kerith" that you could attack with success. You seemed to think in the article you published that I was not acquainted with the subject, but I know myself to be quite as well informed as Renan and that there was no point at which you could strike with effect. Neither private nor public criticism has revealed any "mistake." In your article you spoke of the Gospel of John as if you regarded it of some value as an historical document, whereas it is as I am sure you have learned since, a merely ecclesiastical work, I might almost say a romance, and was certainly written many years later than the synoptic Gospels, probably about a hundred years later. For my sake, I mean for the sake of the publisher, I am sorry the advertised attack was not delivered; a well-directed attack would have helped the sale. It surprised me, however, that you did not appreciate the tide of the narrative flowing slowly, but flowing always and diversified with many anecdotes that heighten the interest of the reader. I cannot but think that I have added a prose epic to the volume of English literature. I don't much care whether I have or not, but that is just my feeling.

George Moore.

40 Seventh Street, New York.
Sept. 14, 1920.

My Dear George Moore:

Here is your portrait done at last with a page of your own criticism inserted.

I do not suppose you will think the portrait flattering (you have too many flatterers to want to count me among the number), but I think you will say it is fairly truthful and that in it wittingly I have set down naught in malice.

But on re-reading it for the nth time I think that damned Brook Kerith book has shut away from me the Moore of the "Confessions" and of "Esther Waters" and "The Mummer's Wife"—the Moore I always read with interest. If, on further reflection I find this true, I will certainly amend the sketch in a later edition for I would not willingly denigrate my worst enemy and I still reckon you among those friendly to me—mildly friendly.

In the old days you used to tell me that a slating review was the best of all advertisements and you used to ask me to slate you rather than leave you unmentioned. I think you take up more space in this book than anyone except Shaw which will afford you perhaps a bland satisfaction.

I don't know whether I shall ever see you again though I hope to be back in Paris and at work on my autobiography early this next year. "John Bull" says I am pining for England. Bumley is mistaken. I never pined for England in my life though I think cold grouse and a bottle of Brut Champagne, such as one can get only in London, the best lunch in the world.

Sincerely yours,

Frank Harris,

Oct. 8. 1920.

My dear Bruno, here is a copy of the second Series of Portraits. In it the most important probably, certainly the longest, deals with George Moore this work in "The Brook Kerith". Yesterday I got the enclosed letter from him answering me & incidentally "knocking" Shaw. Very interesting, don't you think? from this gentleman who believes that "aesthetics" & "Synthesis" have some intimate connection

Yours Frank Harris.

127 Ebury St.,
September 27.

My Dear Harris:

I have just read your letter and I like to answer it before I receive the volume. There were some excellent glimpses in the first part of your article in Pearson's and the pages you published in the magazine and if you had written more about the object than the writer the "portrait" would have been better, more life like. I wrote to you about some mistakes you made in speaking of the "Brook Kerith"; I believe I did and if I didn't my negligence was shameful for you spoke of my lack of scholarship. It is true that I make no pretensions to scholarship but it is also quite true that I read and assimilated the story of the origins of Christianity before writing the Brook Kerith with the good result that no one has been able to pick a hole in my erudition. I believe that I spoke of the Essines ringing a bell instead of sounding a gong. The melodic line, i. e., the line of narrative, has never been excelled; that merit you should have not overlooked. Of course it is open to anyone to say that the writing isn't what it should be; and in that opinion I am disposed to agree; but of the writing you didn't complain and nobody has complained except myself; and these things being as I state them I cannot but think that the Brook Kerith is a blind patch in your mind, and I cannot but think too that your prejudice against the book was engendered by the fact that you wrote a story in which there is question of Jesus and Paul. You will resent the suggestion and you will do so truthfully for nobody believes himself to be prejudiced. I am writing all this because I should have put you straight regarding the erudition, and my hope is that your unfortunate remark about John's Gospel at the end of the first part of your article in Pearson's does not appear in the book. I am sure I wrote to you pointing out that John's Gospel was a romance written in the second century of no historical value whatever. You write better about men than you do about books—I mean that I think you do.

Shaw is without any aestheticism whatsoever and being without any synthesis he cannot pursue a train of thought for more than a few lines and has then to contrive his escape in a joke; and it is strange that you have not yet perceived that his jokes are vulgar claptrap, the jokes of the clowns in the pantomime.

You have in yourself a subject that will carry your name down the ages if you write it with the necessary sincerity; that of Jean Jacques: and it will not surprise me if you do write it truthfully for I think there is a love of truth in you.

I learn from your letter that you haven't lost your taste for food; it is extraordinary how what a man is transpires in his writing; there were more luncheons in your life of Oscar Wilde than ever were eaten in this world. You will be surprised to hear that I do not lunch; it takes too much time and while my secretary goes forth to find hers I write my letters: this scribble is achieved between one and two.

It may interest you to hear what I am writing. I have practically finished Heloise and Abelard, an epical story of my journeys with a sad end; the erudition of this book is much more subtle and complex than anything in the Brook Kerith for I had to assimilate all the scholastic philosophy, the troubadours their poetry and music, as well as the life of the time. Abelard was a light before the dawn; and it was he who unlocked the dungeon in which the ecclesiastics had imprisoned humanity. It is true that he did not throw the door wide open like Luther, but he opened it.

If you go to Paris in the spring enough of my affection for my old friend remains to compel me to take a ticket to join him for a few hours and to listen to him as of yore while he eats his luncheon.

As ever,

George Moore.

EXTRAORDINARY LETTER OF GEORGE MOORE TO FRANK HARRIS CRITICISING BERNARD SHAW

350. **MOORE (GEORGE).** A. L. s., 4 pp., 4to, 121 Ebury Street, September 27 [1920]. To Frank Harris.

A REMARKABLE LETTER, in which he writes at length, answering Harris's criticism of "The Brook Kerith."

"I have practically finished Heloise and Abélard an epical story of many journeys with a sad end. The erudition of this book is much more subtle and complex than anything in The Brook Kerith, for I had to assimilate all the scholastic phi'osophy, the troubadours, their poetry and music as well as the life of the time," etc.

NOT THE LEAST INTERESTING IS MOORE'S COMMENT ON SHAW:

"Shaw is without any aestheticism whatsoever, and being without any synthesis he cannot pursue a train of thought for more than a few lines, and has then to contrive his escape in a joke; and it is strange that you have not yet perceived that his jokes are vu'gar claptrap—the jokes of the clown in the pantomime."

IMPORTANT SIX-PAGE LETTER OF A MOST INTIMATE NATURE

350A. **MOORE (GEORGE).** A. L. s., 6 full pages, 8vo, 121 Ebury Street, no date. To Frank Harris.

A LONG AND MOST INTERESTING LETTER REGARDING HIS WORK *"The Brook Kerith,"* of which Frank Harris had announced an attack.

"I know there is nothing in 'The Brook Kerith' that you could attack with success . I knew myself to be quite as well informed as Renan and that there was no point at which you could strike with effect . . .

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